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Raising Transit Fares A Serious Misstep – editorial

Gov. M. Jodi Rell's proposal to raise transit fares is unfair, unimaginative and unwise.

In her latest budget proposal, Mrs. Rell calls for a 40 percent increase in the CT Transit bus fare and a 10 percent hike on Metro-North tickets. That means bus riders would pay \$1.75 instead of \$1.25 and train riders would have to shell out as much as \$40.70 for a peak round-trip ticket from New Haven to Grand Central Station, an increase of \$3.70.

The governor said the fare increases will slice \$45 million from the state's projected \$8 billion deficit for the next two years. A coalition of business, environmental and transportation groups are telling her to find the money somewhere else. They are right.

According to census data analyzed by the nonprofit Tri-State Transportation Campaign, bus riders in Connecticut make about half the annual income earned by those who drive to work. Soaking the bus riders when many have no other option is not fair.

Hitting up the Metro-North riders isn't much better. They have endured two major fare increases in the past six years, and have another one, of 7 percent over seven years, beginning next year to pay for new rail cars. The result is that Metro-North riders are already paying the highest fares of any commuter railroad in the country, said Jim Cameron, chairman of the Connecticut Metro-North/Shore Line East Rail Commuter Council.

Sound public policy would encourage state residents to use transit. It lowers pollution, congestion, energy use and reliance on foreign oil. People had been getting the message: Transit use hit a 52-year high last fall. But with the recession, the numbers have begun to drop. If it becomes economically advantageous to drive, many Connecticut commuters will join the fuming swath of steel inching along I-95.

A spokesman for the governor said the fare hike is necessary because the state's transportation fund is on track to run a deficit by 2011. Opponents say the \$45 million could be had by adding a penny to the gas tax. That's the better policy option.

Transit is subsidized; so are highways. If we want people to use transit, then the incentives should favor transit, and the needed funds should come from the highway sector — from gas taxes, tolls or some other mechanism, such as a tax on vehicle miles traveled. Legislative leaders say they are looking for an alternative to raising transit fares; let's hope they find one.